

The New Criterion

By Andrew L. Shea | October 1, 2019

Exhibition Note

On “Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown” at the Parrish Art Museum.

Sandro Botticelli is alleged to have claimed that “by just throwing a sponge full of different colors at the wall, you leave a stain, in which you can see a beautiful landscape.” It’s a poetic-sounding line, but the Early Renaissance Florentine said it with a sneer, deriding the importance of a subject that he believed could be depicted with the most cursory and random of gestures. Nonetheless, I hope I can be forgiven for having thought of it while watching a video of Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) at work in her studio with sponge in hand—squeezing, spreading, scrubbing, and flicking paint across a floor-bound canvas—that helps introduce “Abstract Climates: Helen Frankenthaler in Provincetown,” an exhibition that examines Frankenthaler’s relationship with the Cape Cod town and its natural environs on now at the Parrish Art Museum.

Abstract Expressionism has long been associated with the transcendental myth of the American landscape, and among her peers Frankenthaler was especially ready to acknowledge the link in her own work. She frequently titled paintings after the places that inspired them, and she did landscape studies throughout much of her working life. She once called *Mountains and Sea* (1952, not included in the exhibition), the painting for which she is best known, a “totally abstract memory of the landscape” of coastal Nova Scotia, which she had visited months before.

But can a “memory of the landscape” be “totally abstract,” or does that memory imply some sort of causal relationship with an original, external, observed experience? And if we’ll allow for this sort of psychological painting, one “abstracted” by the subjective forces of memory, then what’s the line between those kinds of landscapes and their more traditional cousins, works in which the viewer can reasonably associate forms with “real life”? Does the influence of a place such as open and airy Provincetown seep into the paintings, and, if so, what might be the signs of such influence? “Abstract Climates,” originally hosted by the

Providence Art Association and Museum, prompts these sorts of questions in its attempt to chronicle the painter's working relationship with this historic artists' colony.



Helen Frankenthaler, *Provincetown Window*, 1963–64, Acrylic on canvas. Photo: Tim Pyle, courtesy Helen Frankenthaler Foundation.

An introductory gallery includes works that Frankenthaler made while a student at Hans Hofmann's renowned school in Provincetown during the summer of 1950. Frankenthaler's professional rise was lightning-fast, and *Mountains and Sea*, painted at the impossibly young age of twenty-three, just two years after the summer in question, is often described as if it simply poofed into existence ex nihilo following a Eureka moment in the studio of Jackson Pollock. The student

pieces on display here correct this conception, replacing it with an understanding of young Helen as sharply in touch with a large number of important painterly influences, both contemporary and historical. Hanging are a sensitive, de Kooning-esque charcoal study of a semi-deconstructed female figure; a Marin-like watercolor depicting the Provincetown Harbor with energetic, dry-brushed marks; a Surrealism-inspired landscape titled Provincetown Bay; and an abstraction inflected with what Frankenthaler herself disparagingly called "collegiate Cubism," with its perhaps too-rigid study of planar relationships and all-over design.

The cumulative effect of these mostly derivative but not unpromising paintings is to show that Frankenthaler probably agreed with T. S. Eliot's idea that a "poet cannot help being influenced, therefore he should subject himself to as many influences as possible, in order to escape from any one influence." Frankenthaler clearly drank deeply of her immediate aesthetic surroundings, as well as the greater tradition of Western painting. At the same time, the sharply perfectionist and self-critical painter seemed anxious to come upon a "look" all her own, writing in her journal of a "A prob[lem] of too many styles" in March 1950.

With her innovative "soak stain" technique Frankenthaler soon did just this, and through the next six or seven years she created some of her greatest and most original works. But the artist wouldn't return regularly to Provincetown until 1959, after she married Robert Motherwell, and so the exhibition picks up here, by which time Frankenthaler had earned her place in the upper echelons of the New York art world.

By the looks of the Parrish Museum's presentation, Frankenthaler returned to Provincetown with unbounded energy. A number of works on paper from the Provincetown Series (all 1960) have a sort of chaos to their varied mark-making and unusual color. These must have been deeply informative to the similarly riotous larger works on unprimed canvas of this period, full of wild calligraphies in uncomfortable tension with their remarkable sparsity.



Frankenthaler in her studio "in the woods," Provincetown, Massachusetts, Summer 1969.

The relationship between paintings and place becomes progressively more clear over the course of the 1960s, a decade in which Frankenthaler returned to Provincetown each summer with Motherwell and his two children, Lise and Jeanne. We find Frankenthaler moving from sparse, linear abstractions to more luminous compositions where the tension between tonal atmosphere and graphic shape seems to take over as a primary concern. Among these later works are paintings that occasionally veer closely to recognizable landscape forms, such as *Flood* (1967), a large work whose expanses of burnt orange and pink in the upper registers atop slimmer bands of green and blue can read as a sort of dramatic sunset over an inlet or bay. Frankenthaler never tips over the edge into direct representation—here the green "land" section shoots impossibly upwards, almost all the way up to the top-right corner of the canvas—but once you make the association it's tough to unsee.

Befitting its organizing principle, "Abstract Climates" includes letters, photographs, and other biographical paraphernalia that reveal a bucolic existence in Provincetown. This sense of happiness is corroborated in a catalogue note by Lise Motherwell (a co-curator of the exhibition along with the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation's executive director, Elizabeth A. T. Smith) who looks back fondly on her Cape Cod days, only occasionally disturbed by her step-mother's studio angst and strident perfectionism. Of course, as is usually the case, the real story of this exhibition are the paintings themselves. In the Parrish's spacious galleries, the "climate" of these works is one shimmering with light.

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